

By Ruth Ostrow

One of my favourite cartoons in the world has a fellow standing in front of a cheerful secretary who is holding open her boss's diary. The fellow has an optimistic look on his face and she is saying to him with bright exuberance: "Ummm, how about never? Would never be okay with you?"

It is such a sign of the times. How often we bump into old friends in the street or at parties and the dreadful truth lingers in the air. "We must catch up!" says one. "Oh yes, we must!" drools the other. "When are you free?" says the first person. And we long to say cheerfully: "Never works for me. Does never work for you?"

We can't be honest about friendships that pass their use-by date. We use euphemisms instead. "Let's meet for coffee some time!" means "I will never, ever, meet you for coffee. Don't take it personally. You are just not on my priority list, which includes kids, shopping, a full-time job, taxi-driving and keeping my partner sexually satisfied even when my latest sexual fantasy involves me and a warm doona."

There's the even less honest: "It's sooooo good to see you!" You can tell how un-good it is by the tension in the cheeks supporting a false smile, and the folded arms. A gushing "How are you?" means "In two sentences or less" or, as someone said to me recently, mid-story: "Ruth ... Edit!"

I was reflecting upon this at a recent party surrounded by old friends I hadn't seen in a long time. Yes, I did enjoy seeing them and having the odd bit of banter, but I didn't want to have the dreaded: "And how are you since I saw you last?" conversation. "Oh, you mean over the past 20 years. Well, I'll start in January 1985 when I got my first urinary tract infection ... "

In order to maintain meaningful friendships (as opposed to acquaintances) there has to be a deeper connection that links you together, real care, real love, real investment of "energy" which doesn't erode with time. Otherwise why bother? It's exhausting doing the "Johnny is in grade six now ... " routine. "Gosh, he was only six inches tall when I saw him last."

Like all living/growing things, friendships require effort and watering to stay alive. We abandon them for long periods and expect them still to bear fruit. The fact is we've had higher priorities than this person - as happens - and there's nothing left but brown leaves. Friendships do go off with time. If you have to resort to discussing what grade the kids are in, give up. Your "friends" will be as relieved as you are.

www.ruthostrow.com

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